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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHINGTON DC

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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Nicaraguan Municipal Elections

REF: MANAGUA 1392

MANAGUA 1393

¶1. SUMMARY: The current political unrest in Nicaragua, arising from disputed municipal election results (REFTELS), is dominating all forms of domestic media. Amidst the clamor, foreign press articles and editorials regarding the situation have been well covered by local press as have State Department and Embassy statements. Declarations by prominent Nicaraguan civil society groups and international donors--dovetailing with the USG call for a transparent vote recount--have also been well reported. Only the Sandinista-controlled media outlets have distorted or minimized the statements and/or added to the violence by inciting viewers. Several journalists, including from pro-government outlets, have been injured in the violence. END SUMMARY.

What's Being Reported

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¶2. Center-left national daily "El Nuevo Dario" (circ. 30,000) ran an article November 11 quoting Deputy Spokesperson Wood entitled, "No more violence and count vote by vote." The article reads in part:

The United States Government urged Nicaragua to guarantee electoral results that exactly correspond with the will expressed in the voting booths by the people of Nicaragua in the elections this past Sunday, asserting that the lack of national and international observers complicates the credible evaluation of the municipal election results.

In the customary daily press briefing, Deputy State Department Spokesman Robert Wood yesterday pointed out...the case in Nicaragua, highlighting that they have received information of widespread irregularities in the Nicaraguan elections...Wood underlined that "though the official results are not yet available, we note that domestic observation groups and opposition parties have reported widespread irregularities throughout vote centers in Nicaragua. Unfortunately, the decision of the Supreme Electoral Council not to accredit national and international electoral observers has made difficult an appropriate evaluation of the elections," Wood pointed out.

¶3. "El Nuevo Dario" ran an article November 11 covering the European Union statement. Text in the article reads:

...The EU presidency calls for an "effort towards transparency" in order to "dissipate the criticism, especially in terms of the recounting of votes," said the communique. The Union...regrets the lack of accreditation of independent national and international observers, whose absence makes the evaluation of the regularity of the election difficult. "The European Union will follow the situation with utmost attention," the text added.

¶4. Center-right national daily "La Prensa" (circ. 40,000) ran an article November 11 which reads:

The Liberal candidate for the Managua mayorship, Eduardo Montealegre, demanded today that the full Supreme Electoral Council review every electoral tally sheet of every voting station in Managua, from the municipal elections held last Sunday, which he qualified as fraudulent...The opposition candidate insisted that the electoral tally sheets held by the alliance, led by the Constitutional Liberal Party, "clearly" show that the liberals won the elections last Sunday in Managua.

According to Montealegre, the distortions in the Council's facts are "a pattern that is seen throughout the country" [...] "We have to review each electoral document because it cannot be that the documents that the Council has are different from what ours say, if the information was gathered from the same process," Montealegre said.

¶5. Center-right daily "La Prensa" (circ. 40,000) published a half-page spot on November 12 paid for by the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, which represents the Catholic Church leadership. An article on the placement reports that:

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...The Conference's call for "review and comparison of all the electoral tally sheets in the hands of the political parties that participated and that were signed at the moment of the closing of the voting places, as a solution to the 'general distrust of the population.'"

In a pastoral letter, read by the Secretary of the Conference of Bishops, Monsignor Rene Sandigo, stated that the priests feel that this 'review and comparison' should be done 'with the presence of the political party observers and foreign and national observing organizations'. The priests also made an 'urgent calling' for the Supreme Electoral Council to 'act honestly, with transparency and impartiality, for their own dignity and for the respect of the sacred vote that the Nicaraguan people conscientiously deposited.' The Catholic Church has actively participated in the electoral process and justified yesterday's message as 'a clear posture in favor of the people, who feel frustrated by the electoral results in many municipalities.'"

¶6. "La Prensa" also ran paid declarations for the American Chamber of Commerce and Superior Council of Private Businesses (COSEP) on November 12. Text of the accompanying news article reads:

The American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) and the Private Business Superior Council (COSEP) stated last night that they do not trust the results of the past municipal elections held on November 9. Both business organizations declared their discontent and agreed that a review of the electoral tally sheets was necessary for all the polling stations in Managua and those municipalities in which there was non-conformity with the results...

The statement released November 11 by AmCham referred to "the alarming actions that occurred in the last few hours in our country in the municipal electoral process, blurred and shadowed by the phantom of fraud and the lack of respect for the popular will and the lack of national and international observation." "Despite the irregularities which occurred before and during the electoral process, we demand that the truth prevail in an environment of respect for the popular will" said the communique. The business chamber asked that there be "representatives of friendly countries and organizations" so that, together with national personalities they can work together in an ad-hoc commission in a process of

review."

¶7. On November 14, "La Prensa" highlighted international media pressure regarding the elections, picking up on articles in "The Economist" and "Le Monde." The "La Prensa" article reads: "How to steal an election. Daniel Ortega sets an ugly precedent." This is the title of one of the articles in the print edition of the respected British magazine "The Economist," while the influential French newspaper "Le Monde" last week published an article entitled, "Relations between Nicaragua and the European Union Embittered." Both media outlets emphasized the possibility that direct budget support (of some \$120 million annually) that the European Union and various European nations bilaterally give to Nicaragua could diminish next year.

¶8. Center-left national daily "El Nuevo Diario" ran an article November 15 which quoted Ambassador Callahan's response to a press question regarding U.S. foreign assistance in light of the election fraud. The text reads:

At any given time the U.S. can "review," "evaluate" and "examine" the level of cooperation that it keeps with Nicaragua...announced U.S. Ambassador Robert Callahan. Callahan stated that the U.S. has "serious doubts that the process was transparent and open and that the results reflect the political will of Nicaraguans." Later he added, "I cannot speak for all international cooperation, but as for us, obviously, my country reserves the option to review, evaluate and examine the level of cooperation."

¶9. "El Nuevo Diario" also ran an article November 15 which reads:

The outgoing mayor of Managua, Dionisio Marenco, publicly stated his doubts about whether Alexis Arguello, the FSLN candidate, was the clear winner of the November 9 municipal elections. "I think the Supreme Electoral Council needs to be more flexible and clearly

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explain each electoral tally sheet and find out who is lying, who erased the tally sheets and who destroyed them," he said. If this does not happen, "there will always be a serious doubt, and it is not even worth declaring a winner because it will create distrust which will in turn have an impact on the political state of things and the governance of the country and sociologically we will go back about forty years," Marenco said. "I am not really clear how many votes Alexis got, where he got them from, how many he actually won, with what number of votes. I won with 145,000, Herty with 135,000. Alexis should have won with 155,000 if you follow the natural vote growth. If you tell me that he won with 300,000 votes I doubt it because it is not possible to get that many," said Marenco. He insisted that "it will be difficult for people to believe and trust in the Supreme Electoral Council. If that happens, we will have created a [situation of] distrust where no one believes us and we would not be able to govern."

¶10. On November 18, "La Prensa" ran an article which consisted of a verbatim reprint of the text of the November 16 "Washington Post" editorial stating that "President Ortega is moving to construct another dictatorship and calls on the United States to suspend the Millennium Challenge Account."

¶11. On November 20, the electronic version of "El Nuevo Diario" posted an article citing the Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA) statement issued November 19. Nearly verbatim versions of the statement ran in the print versions of both dailies on November 21. The "El Nuevo Diario" article entitled, "United States NGO calls for cessation of violence in Nicaragua," reads in part:

The Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA) expressed concern over the tension between the government and opposition parties and urged the political leadership of the country to "avoid any type of violence." [...] The NGO urged the Supreme Electoral Council to carry out a recount of the votes of the past election in the presence of national and international observers in the municipalities where the final results are in dispute.

Distortion of Reality

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¶12. In addition to print reporting, these statements by domestic civic society, religious and business groups, as well international governments, NGOs, foreign press articles and editorials have been widely reported in other formats including extensive coverage by independent national radio and TV stations. On November 17, a prominent evening talk show hosted by well-respected journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro was dedicated to reviewing the international reporting on the situation in Nicaragua. However, according to the "official" Sandinista media outlets, this international pressure has had no effect, other than to "prove the Gringo-backed conspiracy to topple the Government of Reconciliation and Peace." NOTE: The Sandinista outlets Radio Ya, Radio La Sandino, and Channel 4 are primarily owned and controlled by the FSLN party. News and advertisements for these outlets are directed by Government Communications Coordinator, First Lady Rosario Murillo. The Ortega government has, at times, represented to Post that employees of these outlets are official members of the Presidential staff, therefore Post is unable to work with them on a journalistic basis. END NOTE.

¶13. On November 18, the day of the planned opposition Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) march in Managua, the official Sandinista Channel 4 dedicated the majority of the day to showing images of violence in the street with sub-headlines such as "people infuriated by Eduardo Montealegre's crimes." Nearly all images were of vandals clad in red and black (FSLN party colors), many carrying Sandinista flags. At times, the commentator and announcers stated that "liberals dressed as Sandinistas were committing acts of violence." Some of the most egregious anti-U.S. commentary aired around 3 p.m. in the afternoon. Once the PLC announced it would not be able to proceed with the march, Channel 4 began reporting that the Liberal march failed because the "people" were opposed to it and did not allow it to happen. "The Right failed and pulled back due to the power of the people." The propagandist commentators and street reporters for the station spoke for nearly three hours at the top of

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their lungs, yelling slogans and encouraging the crowd to chant. The studio commentator stated that "the North American Embassy's plan to interfere has failed...The U.S. Embassy has threatened to withhold aid in the past, this isn't anything new but, they won't do it... This is a Gringo Embassy plan that has failed, showing that the people no longer accept the neo-liberal capitalist system. Don't believe the lies you see on other channels, channel 2 transmits on a stolen frequency, that channel and "La Prensa" and "El Nuevo Diario" are inciting violence by continually publicizing Montealegre's election crimes." Similar sentiments were aired on the Sandinista radio stations throughout the day.

Media Under Fire

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¶14. Throughout the protests the opposition media provided extensive and generally balanced coverage. Many reporters and wire photographers were injured and/or violently prevented from entering protest areas by Sandinista supporters. Reporters from Channels 2 and 8 and from both main papers had a particularly rough time. Specific injuries and threats to opposition and independent media, including serious radio station interference and signal jamming, are too numerous to mention here and will be reported SEPTTEL. However, it should be noted that the government-affiliated Channel 4 was given preferential access by Sandinista supporters to cover the unrest. The station aired footage shot from trucks speeding along protest routes as Sandinista reinforcements were dropped off, many of whom were seen blocking opposition media shouting "only channel 4 allowed here." We must also note that a reporter from government-affiliated Radio Ya was attacked. This reporter, known to be part of President Ortega's press entourage, was injured and his truck burned at 3 a.m. on November 17. Inexplicably, an unidentified TV crew was there well before police or other assistance, to film him lying on the ground as the truck burned. It turned out that the destroyed truck had been rented by ALBA-Caruna, a quasi-government entity for channeling off-budget Venezuelan assistance to Nicaragua. It was unclear how the Radio Ya reporter came in possession of the vehicle.

Conclusion

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¶15. COMMENT: Prior to the elections, the GON was engaged in efforts to close democratic space available to criticize its actions, including by media. Given the strong coverage that independent local media outlets provided of the political unrest and the chorus of domestic and international calls for a peaceful, transparent solution involving an international electoral audit and review, the Nicaraguan government will almost certainly resume and increase its pressure on the media. On November 20, the Nicaraguan Professional Journalists Association (Colegio de Periodistas) issued a statement condemning the recent election-related violence against journalists, stating that "without freedom of expression there is no democracy." Additional physical attacks on journalists are likely, as are questionable legal maneuvers to suspend the legal standing and frequency registrations of legitimate stations. Other tactics that we expect to be resumed and increased include, harassment of individual journalists and media companies through tax "audits" and spurious slander and libel charges leveled at media by the government or its paid proxies. Prior to the elections government-affiliated outlets featured almost daily appearances by senior government officials that attacked opponents using ad hominem arguments, half-truths and innuendo. We anticipate an intensification of this government-facilitated defamation campaign against opposition candidates, media and regime opponents.

SANDERS